

Letter From Hon. Delazon Smith

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

"Letter From Hon. Delazon Smith." *The Annals of Iowa* 20 (1937), 527-534.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.5920>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

LETTER FROM HON. DELAZON SMITH¹

FACTS INTERESTING TO ALL PERSONS IN THE STATES WHO CON-
TEMPLATE IMMIGRATING TO OREGON BY THE OVERLAND
ROUTE; JUDICIOUS OUTFIT; TIMELY HINTS;
TIME OF STARTING, &c.

Albany; Linn Co., O. T. [Oregon Ty.]
November 23, 1852.

Friend Waterman: Dear Sir:—Before leaving Iowa in the month of April last, I promised several newspaper editors that I would write them a description of Oregon, and the more important particulars and incidents of my journey. Perhaps an hundred persons earnestly solicited the same favor at my hands. And, inasmuch as ere this will reach the States the time will arrive when all those who contemplate coming to Oregon the ensuing season, will find it expedient to set about a preparation, I will begin about that which most concerns them now, and which is of the very first importance.

First, then, as it respects an outfit for the overland journey from the Missouri river² to Oregon. And first, as to the kind of team. Gen. Lane, the Hon. Mr. Thurston (now deceased) and other gentlemen of much distinction, as well as nine-tenths of those immigrants of former years, whose letters to their friends in the United States, have found their way into the newspapers, recommend the use of oxen. They have invariably represented them as altogether the most safe, sure and reliable, and, in the outcome, as quite as speedy. Now, whatever may have been the experience of those gentlemen, or of others who concur with them, in crossing the plains in former years, my own, and I am sure, that a very large majority of this years immigration, is, that oxen are the very last kind of a team to be preferred! They may, and doubtless have, done much better in years past than they did in the present. And it is unquestionably true that they might continue to perform the journey with certainty and satisfaction in those years when the immigration is very small. And even then either mules or horses are to be preferred.

¹This letter is copied from the *Des Moines Courier*, of March 10, 1853. The *Des Moines Courier* was published at Ottumwa, Iowa. Its name was changed to *Ottumwa Courier* in 1857. The writer, Delazon Smith, was born in Shenango Co., N. Y., October 5, 1816, a graduate of Oberlin College in 1837, admitted to the bar, in the newspaper business in New York and Ohio for a few years, special U. S. commissioner to Quito, Ecuador, in 1842-45, removed to Van Buren County, Iowa, in 1846, converted under the ministry of Henry Clay Dean, pastor of the Methodist church a short time at Keosauqua, removed to Oregon in 1852, and was a member of the State Constitutional Convention in 1857. On the admission of Oregon as a state he was elected as a Democrat to the U. S. Senate from February 14 to March 3, 1850, an unsuccessful candidate for re-election, unsuccessful candidate for Democratic presidential elector in 1860, died in Portland, Oregon, November 19, 1860, and was interred in the City Cemetery, Albany, Oregon.

²We follow the style of capitalizing, etc., as used in the *Courier*.

I would thus classify: 1st, mules; 2d, horses; 3d, oxen. The present season I judge there were 50,000 persons on the road bound for Oregon and California; about 30,000 for the latter place and the remaining 20,000 for Oregon. Independent of loose stock, there were, probably, on the main route, before the separation of the Oregon and California roads, 100,000 animals in the yoke and under the harness. Of the whole number thus employed about six-sevenths, probably, were oxen and cows; the balance was composed of horses and mules, the proportion of horses to mules being, perhaps, as five to one; and yet, there were, of course, a large number of mules. Indeed, if my calculations are correct, there were about 3,000 mules on the road. Out of this number, or whatever other number there was, I saw but one dead mule on the entire route! Of the whole number of horses I saw but five dead ones. Though there must have been, as already suggested, some 14,000 or 15,000 on the road. Whilst of oxen alone I saw, as I should judge, at least 5,000 lying dead by the road side! And those who work oxen usually work cows also. This I would protest against. A very interesting and flattering theory has hitherto been presented to the people of the western States in relation to their mode of getting here—the benefits they would derive from, and that would accrue to them from the same sources after their arrival here. One item in this theory has been that they could work their cows all the way whilst they would afford them milk and butter on the journey; that they were nearly as serviceable in the yoke as oxen, and that on arriving here they would be worth from \$50 to \$100. All of these results are impossible. Work your cows indeed you may. But if you do two results will follow, nine cases in ten, to-wit: your cows will be worth next to nothing for milk, and what milk they do give will hardly be fit to use; and, what is worse than all, if you continue to work them, they will either die on the road, or give out before reaching their journey's end, and so compel you to leave them upon the road. I started with four and worked them. I got through with—none. If I had started with ten and worked them all I might now have one cow instead of being, as I am, cowless. Had I kept their yokes off their necks, I have no doubt but that I should now possess four cows. Bring cows with you by all means, but do not yoke them. Cows are indeed worth from \$50 to \$100 here in Oregon. The possession of ten good cows here may make a man rich. Remember, then, I advise the driving of cows; but protest against their being yoked. I will not quarrel with the doctrines of the Woman's Rights Convention, but I must demur to the yoking up "crying heifers" with "cow brutes" of the sterner sort.

The foregoing are not the only reasons why mules or horses are preferable to oxen for this journey. Mules and horses, if permitted to travel no faster than oxen, will grow fat whilst the oxen will grow poor. But there is no necessity of driving them as slow as you do oxen. The pace of an ox you cannot, ordinarily, hurry. At best you cannot average more than from twenty to twenty-five miles per day with oxen

upon the first part of the route, and from ten to fifteen on the latter part, with horses or mules you make an average of twenty-five miles all the way, and that without injuring them; if you take good care of them. And thus with horses or mules, you may not only arrive in Oregon from one to two months in advance of ox teams, but passing and preceding all such, you are constantly favored with an abundance of good, sweet, virgin grass, and finally cross the Cascade mountains and descend into the valleys of Oregon before the season of wet or cold begins. And, what is equally valuable, you out-travel and escape from the epidemics—contagious diseases which usually seize upon and follow the immigration from and after crossing the Missouri river.

Many have been induced to start with oxen because of their great value and utility here. It is true, oxen are both valuable and useful in Oregon, but so are horses and mules. Oxen are worth \$100 and \$150 per yoke, whilst a good mule readily commands \$100 and upwards; and good American mares are worth from \$150 to \$300. And whilst yokes and chains are not worth much more than they are in the States, a good two horse harness, worth \$20 in the western States, will readily command \$75 here.

But one other point remains to be considered upon this subject. Many persons, contemplating the peculiar mountainous character of this journey, conclude that for families, oxen, though slower, are safer. This, too, is an error. I never heard of a horse or mule team running away on the road! Such events among the ox teams were of daily occurrence. And many were the instances, the present season, where persons were killed or had their bones broken or received other bodily injury from these casualties.

I have been thus particular upon this part of my subject, as viewed in all relations and consequences, it is a matter of vast importance to hundreds who are to follow us to the Pacific. Hundreds, I am now persuaded, who now lie buried along the way, might and would have been now alive and well in the valleys of Oregon, had they started with horse or mule teams, and started early and with light loads. But, independent of the question of life and death, the journey, at the very best, is and must continue to be, not only long, but tedious and perplexingly severe, wearing upon mind and body. Whatever clogs or weights there be they should be lopped off and thrown aside; and whatever can facilitate our march should be eagerly counted and applied. If, therefore, the wealthy farmer or other persons are desirous of bringing oxen let them do so. His employing mules or horses for his family need not prevent his driving any number of loose cattle. Then and in that case he can employ at his option—suffer his family to proceed or accompanying the stock.

[Of course it will be understood that the foregoing and following directions are addressed to all those who will cross the plains. If men and women are determined on coming to Oregon, and can command the means to do so, I would advise them to come by water, as being

decidedly the preferable way. It being, in the end, all things considered, not much if any more expensive; not any more hazardous, and not consuming, in its execution, but about one-third of the time.]

The next thing to be considered is the kind of wagon. Whether you start with oxen, mules or horses, you need no other, and should not, on any account, start with none other than light, strong wagons. Forty-nine-fiftieths, of wagons employed upon the plains, by this year's immigration, were too heavy. Very light, strong, well-made wagons are the best. And if my advice is followed, and mules or horses are employed, I would recommend the building of the very light two-horse wagons, on purpose for the trip, with elliptical springs, light covers, &c. Be sure and keep off and away all surplus weight, whether wood or iron.

The next thing in order is the loading. Upon this point, once for all, and earnestly and emphatically, allow me to advise that nothing be suffered to find a place in a wagon destined for the Pacific, not absolutely necessary for the journey. I am the more particular here since I know that most men and all women, need to be strictly cautioned upon this matter; and even then they will not wholly heed you. If you make up your minds to come to Oregon, you must know that as precedent to that you must make up your mind to give up all, all for Oregon! You need not be told that you must leave your friends and, perchance, the land of your birth and the home of your childhood; or that you must dispose of and leave your homes and farms. This you know. But you must also know that if you cross the plains, you can take nothing with you save sufficient food and clothing to last you here. If you start with more, the chances are five to one that you will either leave them upon the road or kill the team that draws them. And remember that every pound's weight counts one. And remember that that one pound must be a most valuable pound to justify you in hauling and guarding it for 2,500 miles! And remember too, that money will buy almost any article, of either necessity or luxury, in the city of Portland, Oregon, that it would in any of the eastern cities! And whatever cannot be readily obtained here, can be easily forwarded by water.

Most persons are already informed as to what, substantially, they will require for food and raiment, &c., upon the road. However, the directions of different individuals vary materially, and nearly all who have attempted to write upon the subject, either advised erroneously or omit something important. I will therefore seek to correct errors and supply deficiencies in this particular.

It has been frequently stated that you need not start with anything more than bacon, flour, coffee and sugar, and that a very moderate quantity of meat would do, as you could easily supply yourself with deer, elk, antelope and buffalo meat on the way. Well, I have just crossed the Plains, and I was not shut up in either a tent or a wagon, having walked all the way, save about three weeks of the time, during which period I was confined to my wagon by sickness, and I neither

saw elk, deer or buffalo upon the route! I saw a few antelope, and ate a few pounds of their flesh; and I accidentally saw buffalo meat, and I believe that a few live ones were seen at different times, in the distance from our encampment. I doubt not, however, that there have been many more seen and killed in former years. But whether few or many, the man who crosses the Plains has enough to do, if he discharges his duty to himself and family and teams, without chasing wild game. And if he does do it, he would be sure to find, in the end, in the parlance of gamblers, that "the game is not worth the candle!" It will not do then, to rely upon game.

Of flour, each adult person should be provided with 125 pounds; of meat 100 pounds. Bring well cured hams. The bone in a large ham will weigh only from one pound and a half to two pounds. Your hams will keep, and they are both palatable and healthy. Bring also a supply of fat bacon. This you will need, if you come with oxen, for your cattle, even if you do not eat it yourself. Thousands of pounds of it were fed to cattle this year. It destroys, in a measure, at least, the effect of alkali, and opens and removes obstructions in the disease of the bowels. Start also, with a reasonable quantity of the following articles: (being your own judge how much each laboring individual, being hearty, would eat in a given length of time. And the length of time, of course will depend upon how fast you travel; and your speed will depend upon your employing oxen, horses or mules. If oxen, you will ordinarily, be 120 days from the Missouri river to the Cascade Mountains or the Dalles of the Columbia. If either horses or mules are employed, from sixty to eighty days only will be consumed). Sugar, tea, coffee, crackers, corn meal, dried apples and peaches, rice, cheese, salt, soap, pickles, vinegar, mustard, pepper, molasses, salaratus, or yeast powders, butter crackers, dried beef, and venison, honey, butter and peppersauce, horse radish, &c. In addition to all these articles, I started with onions, potatoes, eggs, ginger, nutmegs, spices, oysters and a variety of preserves, dried berries, &c. Why not have them? You must have something to eat, and the more you eat of these articles, the less you will eat of others, and surely they are healthy. Those who eat little else than bread and salt meat, very generally were afflicted with the scurvy, if nothing more serious.

Of the articles enumerated above, be sure to start with a liberal supply of sugar, dried fruit, rice, pickles and vinegar. These articles, especially, were in great demand on the road, and were the first gone. And I would suggest that in the preparation of any or all of these articles, pains should be taken to compress them into the smallest compass. Meats, for instance, another perishable article of diet, from which the intrinsic substance can be extracted, or which can be compressed and hermetically sealed, so as to afford convenience and lessen weight.

In addition to the foregoing articles of food, &c., the following articles will be needed, viz: matches, candles, duplicate whip-lashes, and,

(if you bring either or both gun and pistols) powder, lead and percussion caps. Start too, say with one gallon of spirits of turpentine to each team. This is too searching for ordinary tin cans. Put it in some vessels that you know, before starting, will surely hold it. You will be sure to need it for your cattle's heads and heels, if you drive oxen, and it will be found useful often, drive what you will. I have told you to bring lard; bring black lead, and mix with it for wagon grease. Bring also, a few quarts of tar. It will be found useful often, though you should not want it to grease your wagon. And there is one other article of still greater importance, and which I have known no former writer to even hint at. I allude to ox shoes. Whatever animals you start with be sure and have them shod before you start, and don't fail to bring with you at least one set of new shoes, nails, and tools sufficient to put them on with. And for fear that these may fail, bring a piece of sole-leather enough to shoe all round one or more times, and small horse points, or common (large) carpet tacks to nail them on with. Your oxen will be sure to become lame before you get half way here, and unless you have facilities for shoeing, you will be either obliged to lay by, or leave your cattle. We found a portable blacksmith establishment on the road, about midway of the journey, and I believe they charged \$20 for shoeing a single ox.

You will need more or less of rope upon your journey; and should you wish to lariat your stock you will need iron pins—corresponding in number to the number of your stock—from twelve to eighteen inches long, made the size of your finger, sharp at one end and a ring in the other. But were I to cross the plains again, I would neither tie up oxen or corral them. Let them follow the inclinations of their natures—eat, drink, rest and sleep! When and where they seem inclined to wander, or where there is great danger to be apprehended from the Indians, watch and guard them! Ordinarily, where they can find grass and water, they will—being quite as tired—be as much disposed to remain as you will to have them.

In regard to cooking, I would advise that every family provide themselves with a small sheet iron cooking stove. The best they can get. One made expressly for the trip. Its use on the road early in the spring, during the cold rainy weather, will richly repay you the cost, even should you throw it away at the end of the first 500 miles. But there will be no necessity for this. You will find it useful all the way.

In addition to the stove you will want a camp kettle, tea kettle, coffee pot, one coffee mill, one frying pan, one (tin) kettle, tin basins and plates, iron spoons and some knives and forks. Of knives and forks and spoons, start with twice as many as you think you will need. You will be sure to lose some on the road. If you can conveniently do so, put in a bake kettle and a spider. Should your stove give out you will need them. You will need one axe, a spade and a lantern and a match safe. You will also need kegs for your butter, vinegar, molasses, honey and lard; and either cans or kegs for your water. These should, of

course, be proportioned in size to the number to be supplied. They should, at least, contain water enough to supply all who depend upon them for at least twenty-four hours.

In addition to all that has gone before you should employ some physician to select and put up for you a judicious supply of medicines, suited to the road. Special reference should be had in the selection, to the cholera, dysentery and mountain fever. And among the other things, don't fail to supply yourself with a syringe, and a fine quantity of mustard. Not having these articles the present season, cost many a man his life.

As to your clothing, it is only necessary to remark that this road is especially severe on hats, boots and pantaloons. Get two Kossuth hats. You can wear them both out before you get here. Two pair of boots will do. As to bedding, women and children will require a feather bed, and all, both women and men, will require a liberal supply of clothes. Four-fifths of the nights are cold. And in crossing the Rocky Mountains, you require as much clothing, whether upon your person, or your bed, by day or by night, as you do in the States in the winter. Summer hats, i. e. palm leaf hats, and summer clothing are not needed upon the road. There is, to be sure, a portion of the way where it is very hot during a part of the day. But it will hardly pay to bring much summer clothing.

To those who have never crossed the plains, my dwelling upon details, and laying stress upon what would appear minor matters, will seem trifling and unnecessary. But they will not be so regarded by any who have passed over the road. So controlling are the facts which I have presented, and the suggestions which I have made—simple and immaterial as they may appear—that upon their observance or disregard will depend in a great degree, the speed, safety, interest and happiness of the immigrant, if not, indeed, his very existence. To repeat my advice, then, to all who come to Oregon by the overland route, procure light, strong wagons, take no superfluous or unnecessary article, put four mules to each wagon—Spanish mules always to be preferred. If mules cannot be had, employ four good sound horses, from five to nine years old—such as have been accustomed to exposure and hard work. And if these cannot be conveniently procured, take four or five yoke of oxen, from four to seven years old, well made, thoroughly broke, and good, clear travelers. If possible, start with six such yoke of cattle to each wagon—working three yoke at a time and alternatively. Don't whip or allow others to whip your cattle. An occasional whipping either man or beast will survive, but neither can perform constant labor under the goad for 120 days.

I believe that I have enumerated in the foregoing all the articles necessary to start with, save tools useful on the road. These will naturally suggest themselves to the mind of every practical man; such as an axe, hatchet, saw, augur, drawing knife, chisel, gimblet, spade, &c.—with a few nails. I have but one more piece of advice to give, in this

article to future immigrants, and that is to start early! Whatever else you do, or omit to do, do not fail to heed this advice. If you start early you will be quite sure to get through, though you should have much ill luck. But if you start late you will have ill luck, and perhaps not get through at all! Or if you do, without your stock—your teams and wagons—destitute, dejected; sick, worn out and discouraged! And in this condition you will be forced to seek a home, employment and bread, in a new country and a land of strangers! If, therefore, you can cross the Missouri river as early as the middle of April, do so. If you cannot cross before the middle of May do not come at all. But go into one of the cabins, in the vicinity of Kanesville, recently deserted by the Mormons, and go to work and raise a crop. You will then be on hand to start with fresh teams, early in the spring. Be assured that the journey is too long to be made in one season, unless it be commenced very early in the season.

In the meantime, those who read what I have written, may be anxious to know how I am pleased with Oregon. For the gratification of all such I will here simply add that I do not, as yet, regret starting to Oregon. I am at present satisfied that I came. How the case may stand with me years hence, I cannot, of course, now tell. But I perceive no reason now to induce the supposition that I shall ever regret having come to this new Pacific home.

But I can exclaim, with thousands, that had I the overland journey to this country again to perform, I should know how to come! As very much depends upon the possession of this knowledge, I have no other motive than the good of those who may succeed me, in undertaking to write upon this subject.

I am truly

Your friend,

DELAZON SMITH.

AGRICULTURAL SURPLUS IN 1879

One of the greatest political and economic problems of this country just now, if indeed not the greatest altogether, is to restore to trade a commercial balance. In other words, the most necessary thing to do in reviving business and bringing back prosperity is to find a sale and a ready market for our overplus of products. A market with good prices for our western produce is the first thing.—*Iowa State Register*, January 11, 1879. (In the Newspaper Division of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.)

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.